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SUBJECT: SPLA: Deterring External Threats While Addressing Internal Insecurity

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. In a July 23 meeting with Special Envoy to Sudan Scott Gration, the Government of Southern Sudan's Minister of Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) Affairs Nhial Deng Nhial and the SPLA Chairman of the General Staff James Hoth Mai provided their assessment of the security threats facing Southern Sudan. The two argued that the National Congress Party and the Sudan Armed Forces pose a threat that requires the South to seek rough military parity and thus encourage the North and South to keep their focus on political negotiation. Hoth in particular defaulted to the SPLA's desire for expensive weapon systems such as advanced armor and high-level air defense. Both officials contended that there are available sufficient resources to handle the South's internal security threats.

SPLA STRENGTH NEEDED TO DISCOURAGE MILITARY SOLUTION

¶2. (SBU) In his opening remarks, Nhial characterized the South as facing both internal and external security threats. Although the South's internal threats have "intrinsic factors," he argued they are also in part "offshoots" of the external threat posed by Khartoum. In the absence of a "strategic alliance" between the North and South, Nhial believes that relations are likely to degenerate into armed conflict. He argued that scenarios of future North-South violence are not farfetched, citing possible flashpoints, to include preparations for clean elections and negotiations over the necessary threshold for southern secession in the coming referendum.

¶3. (SBU) Nhial was quick to insist that the South "will not be the first" to make use of military power, stressing that President Salva Kiir and his government remember the pain of war and recognize the need for peace to launch development in the South. Hoth spoke enthusiastically about the CPA, saying that "we have never had such a settlement," and Nhial noted that the international community's spotlight on the CPA has been helpful.

¶4. (SBU) Nhial argued that the best way to avoid conflict is to ensure rough parity between Sudan's two armed forces: "the imbalance must not become so great" that either partner might be tempted to cease negotiating and pursue a military option. He insisted that strengthening the SPLA did not amount to an abandonment of efforts to make unity attractive but, rather, would ensure that unity cannot be imposed. Hoth added that the South had learned lessons from recent history - he cited Rwanda and Kuwait - in which the international community had only been able to assist in the aftermath of major violence, not prevent it. Citing increasingly sophisticated military equipment in the North, Hoth and Nhial made a general pitch for assistance in securing an air defense system for the South. Nhial argued that the international community is "duty-bound" to help prevent indiscriminate bombing of civilians.

¶15. (SBU) Nhial argued that the southern government has the resources and policies needed to deal with its internal problems of law and order, but it is proceeding with a degree of caution that is being incorrectly interpreted by "some" in Sudan as a sign of weakness or lack of capacity. On the other hand, Hoth added that he had been confused by conflicting themes of criticism coming from the international community, which he said objected to the SPLA's past efforts at forcibly disarming civilians but then criticized the government for not doing enough to protect people from armed inter-tribal violence.

¶16. (SBU) Hoth reported that the current civilian disarmament efforts, recently re-launched in Lakes State on a voluntary basis in cooperation with local chiefs, have netted 3,000 guns with relatively little violence. Citizens recognize the threat posed by excessive civilian armaments, he argued, and have been helping their chiefs and the security forces locate hidden weapons. Nhial noted that disarmament will come to the other priority states of Warrab, Jonglei, and Eastern Equatoria once the dry season returns. Nhial conceded that the southern police lacked the mobility and communications capacity needed to carry out this campaign, but he argued that the trade-offs of budgeting made it impossible to prioritize their development at the expense of the SPLA's.

¶17. (SBU) Hoth returned to the issue of military parity, defending Sudan's right to decide to purchase advanced tanks, adding, "that is, if these existed." He insisted that air defense systems were needed to protect the civilian population of the South from

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bombardment in the event of renewed conflict. Gration replied that from a military point of view armor was not the best solution to South Sudan's defensive needs. He pointed out that even a militarily advanced country such as the US could not guarantee complete protection of its civilian population from aerial attack. Point defense of some installations is possible, but any attempt to set up a saturated air system in South Sudan would be cripplingly expensive and of questionable utility.

PROGRESS ON ABYEI, ASSISTANCE NEEDED IN MALAKAL

¶18. (SBU) In conclusion, Nhial praised Gration for his efforts to promote a peaceful acceptance of the Abyei Arbitration Tribunal's ruling on that region's borders. He argued that the parties will have cleared an important hurdle if the NCP is "really on board" with the ruling, but that they will still want to keep Abyei from seceding if the South does. On Malakal, Hoth reported agreement at the Joint Defense Board to relocate the town's Joint Integrated Unit elements outside city limits, but he requested U.S. assistance in establishing the relocated facilities. Nhial made a similar request for assistance with the SPLA general headquarters' shortage of office space. Gration asked the SPLA to make a list of the assistance that they want the U.S. Government to consider providing.

COMMENT

¶19. (SBU) There remains a limited realization in Juba that the most immediate threat to the security of the South at this time is internal conflict between its populations. Advanced or heavy weaponry is of no use in handling such a threat: only a well-trained, disciplined, and mobile infantry or riverine force can effectively tackle this problem, including disarmament of civilians and/or tribal militias. As for T-72 tanks that might not exist, recent news reports in both the local and international press have removed this fig leaf from the SPLA once and for all.

The Special Envoy has cleared this cable.

WHITEHEAD